



Remarks To The Bohemian Club

by [Mrs. Lyndon Baines Johnson](#)

Former First Lady, United States Of America

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Dana, members of the Bohemian Club, a friend recently composed an amusing limerick about me that I will--with trepidation--share with you. It goes:

She attended the nation's deep needs,
was admired by Persians and Medes,
but acquired, sad to say,
somewhere along the way,
an un-natural attachment to weeds

It's that attachment of mine to the things that grow free in nature--wildflowers and shrubs and grasses and trees--that I'd like to talk to you about. I'd like to share with you the reasons that spring from the memories of childhood and the concerns of today.

But first, I want to salute Dana Leavitt, who led a group of us enthusiasts on the primrose--and golden poppy--path last spring through your incomparable Napa Valley. The theme of the trip was "Wine and Wildflowers," and I confess that the more you consumed of one, the more you could see of the other. For four days, we traveled through mountain trails of yellow and orange poppies, blue lupin, and white and yellow owl's clover, drinking from it all a nectar more heady than wine.

And now I am back again in this beautiful state--and on Valentine's Day, no less, to talk to you about a subject that is close to my heart.

I can approach that subject best by beginning to paint on a large canvas. A respected national publication declared recently, "the single most important topic of our time is the state of our environment."

On reading that I thought: How far we have come, in the span of a single generation. I can remember so vividly that when the subject of the environment was brought out on the stage for consideration during Lyndon's administration, we were just beginning to take note of the havoc the human race has wrought on this fragile Earth we call home.

Now, that knowledge--and the fears it breeds--is a staple of our daily life. We are confronted constantly and in myriad ways with the cost we have paid for the civilization we have created and enjoyed: The pollution of rivers and indeed of the seas themselves...the seepage through the soil of toxic waste...the destruction of the ozone, which has been our protection from the sun since our primordial history...the disappearance of entire rain forests...the poisoning of the very air we breathe.

Together, all these dangers form a vast mosaic of concern. The entire mosaic demands the attention of us all. But many of us feel a special affinity for one particular cause, be it saving the whales or preventing oil spills or slowing the warming of the earth by planting more trees.

My special cause, the one that alerts my interest and quickens the pace of my life, is to preserve the wildflowers and native plants that define the regions of our land--to encourage and promote their use in appropriate areas, and thus help pass on to generations in waiting the quiet joys and satisfactions I have known since my childhood.

Growing up rather alone in East Texas, I took my delights in the gifts nature offered me

daily--in the wild pink roses and dew berries I would find in the sandy lanes or the cool pine forests with their understory of white dogwood in April or violets by the clear stream. That was the beginning of what was to become a life-long love affair with nature, and what that love affair has given me is the knowledge that native plants are as much a part of our national heritage as Old Faithful is, or the Capitol Building in Washington--and, more, that they speak the regional accents of the land, saying this is Virginia, or New Mexico, or the California desert after rain.

But like the rain forests of Brazil, the wildflowers of America are in peril. With the increase in our population, the open fields and meadows I once knew have mostly disappeared under grids of housing developments and shopping malls, a spaghetti network of highways, and acres of concrete parking lots. And buried beneath it all, lost to everything but memory, is the habitat for many species of plant life and the small animals and other wildlife they supported.

Can this vanishing legacy be saved, even as our population expands? This was the question I pondered in the years after I left Washington and especially after Lyndon died when I faced the rest of my life alone. We cannot keep all the fields of bluebonnets just as the Lord gave them to us. The needs of people for food and shelter and comfort, will, of course, always come first. But we can help redress the danger we have brought to nature's shifting balance. We can compensate for the loss of a part of their habitat by deliberately incorporating wildflowers and native grasses and their companions into new areas that will hospitably receive them, where their use will be appropriate, and where they can continue to grace the country with their color and glory. Where are those places? In our planned landscapes, along highway rights-of-way, in city and state parks, public lands and industrial parks, the roughs of golf courses, in country churchyards and suitable areas in our own homes.

Should we do this? That was the question that came hard on the heels of the first one. Is it worthwhile to take these steps to preserve this disappearing part of our life? Well, for me, who has taken a lifetime of joy from nature's bounty, the immediate answer came easily, and quickly, for I well know how richly wildflowers and grasses and other native trees and plants can reward us with their recurring beauty that comes with the seasons.

But I have spent a part of my life as a business woman, so I respect balance sheets and look for actions that are cost-effective. And it is simple common sense that there are hard, practical economic reasons to make use of these plants in the ways I have described.

To begin with, the use of native plants instead of mannered landscaping will help slow the depletion on our precious water tables. It is a sobering fact that only 2.1 percent of the Earth's land surface is covered with fresh water--and even more sobering that so much of this scarce resource is used for landscaping purposes. In our own country, we put more than 30 percent of the water available to us into our lawns and parks and golf courses. In the Southern states alone, that figure increases to over 50 percent. If we don't change these practices, we will literally shorten the future of our planet as a hospitable place to live.

Native plants, once established, require much less water. In fact, they require less of everything--less maintenance, little or no insecticides and fertilizers, less labor, less frequent use of equipment. For example, in one large industrial park in Wisconsin there's an insurance company where the area close to the building was managed traditionally with turf grass, exotic plants, seasonal flower beds. Farther from the building they established a meadow of native prairie. In the prairie area the savings in the landscaping budget was about 65 percent. Another example also in Wisconsin the cost of the traditional landscaping was \$1000 per acre for a year--and the native prairie was about \$10. So the reasons are abundant--aesthetic and economic alike--why this natural legacy should be saved, and put to use wherever appropriate.

The final question was: What can I do about it? I did not know the answer, but I knew I cared about trying. So with the arrival of my 70th birthday--the "happy hour" of my life--I decided to "pay my rent," so to speak, for the space I've taken up in this land, and for the pleasure and peace and sustenance this green Earth has given me for so many years, by establishing--along with many good friends--the [National Wildflower Research Center](#).

That was seven years ago, December 1982. Our aim was simply enough stated: (One) to

promote the use of wildflowers and other native plants. But behind that simple aim lay an ambitious agenda. We knew so little. Remember, we were trying to redress an imbalance we had inflicted on nature, which meant that we had to unlock some of nature's secrets. In the lost past, nature had worked her magic in silence, never telling why she painted a hillside in coreopsis and a valley in Texas blue bonnets, the Smokies in mountain laurel. Why there could be a carpet of gaillardia here and there a bank of primrose. There are 20,000 species of wildflowers, and only about 200 of them had been studied--those useful for food, fiber, medicine. If we were to encourage their use across this broad land, we would have to learn what would grow where, and why, how their seeds were germinated and their life cycles extended, in what conditions they would flourish and grow and return next year. So research would inevitably be the Wildflower Center's second mission.

Hand-in-hand with research would go promotion. And promotion means education--a presumptuous word in this context, and one I hesitate to use, but I know of no other that is as expressive. We have grown accustomed--even addicted--to a neat manicured look, to long slopes of lushly green lawn, closely mowed, to clipped hedges and carefully cultivated flower beds. When wildflowers, on the contrary, go to seed they look scruffy--and they must stay that way for a while so they can return to their glory next season. We are not out, of course, to plow up and transform the front yards of America--what we hope to achieve is a balance--but even in the parks and roadsides, it will often take an effort for the public to accept wildflowers in the stage of seeding. People have to come to understand their usefulness and their cycles.

Where, after seven years, are we? What have we done with our time and the money people have given us?

I believe that we have raised the public's awareness of the need to re-establish and use--to save some habitat--for native wildflowers, grasses, shrubs of this land. Too, our research has provided breakthroughs in the propagation and establishment of several regional wildflowers (lupinus and paintbrush). We have also initiated research on the re-establishment of an endangered species and then put it back into its natural habitat.

Our research has stimulated similar work by universities and botanic gardens across the nation on the wildflowers and other native plants of their region.

We gather information from many places--universities and arboreta, botanical gardens and just plain dirt gardeners. And we spread that knowledge widely to all those who want it--park managers, highway planners, landscapers--through our publications and conferences and lectures. In one year, we had 24,000 inquiries! So we are serving as a clearinghouse for information, which was one of our primary aims.

In letters I get from many of my generation, it is clear we have touched a chord of memory. They tell of their recollections of the clear streams and the open fields and the changing colors of times gone by.

And there are as well other messages which speak not of lost beauty but of present trends--such as the signs in Charleston parks which announce: "South Carolina Wildflower Alliance: Saving Your Tax Dollars By Not Mowing." And I'm encouraged by the understanding of the public demonstrated in this movement to re-establish native plants, and by the widely spread articles in such diverse publications as National Geographic and Smithsonian and People Magazine and the Wall Street Journal.

By tapping both of these sentiments--a respect for the natural heritage of the past, and a regard for the dwindling resources of the present and the future--we have succeeded, I believe, in establishing the threat to the wildflowers of America as a legitimate part of the whole vast mosaic of concern for our damaged environment. Is it too much to hope wildflowers is a cause whose time has come?

The path through these seven years, as we struggled to be born and then to survive, has been exciting and, at times, perilous. The path through the years ahead, as we struggle to prevail, will have its own challenges. I see them as two-fold: to stir the passions of the young, the generation that must live out its life coping with the excesses and savaging of the past...and enlisting the interest and the aid of American industry, the giant that has so many times in our history turned disaster into triumph with the alchemy of its genius.

I hope you will be with us on the journey.

Thank you.

Source: This speech was mailed to Gifts of Speech by Betty Tilson, Assistant to Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson from the LBJ Ranch in Stonewall, Texas on June 8, 1998.

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